

## Chapter 18

# “I Didn’t Expect YOU to Be the University President!”: A Critical Reflection on Three Decades of Women’s Leadership in Canadian Academia

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### **ABSTRACT**

*After decades of being male dominated in nearly every respect, Canadian universities made significant progress toward gender equity in 1980s and ‘90s. That momentum stalled for the most part for almost two decades, and only in the past few years has an awareness of the lack of progress—as well as the importance of overtly promoting gender equity and women’s leadership—re-emerged as an urgent priority both for faculty members and for the institutions where they work. In this chapter, the past three decades of women’s advancement and leadership in Canadian academia are described and analyzed through the reflections and experiences of one woman.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

When I was approached about writing a chapter for this book, I gave it a great deal of thought. Do I have anything to say that would interest readers? Is my story unique? After considerable thought, I decided that my story is not unique – which is perhaps what makes it all the more important that I tell it.

For that reason, in this chapter I will outline the personal and professional journey I have taken – one in which I have served as a university president for more than a decade, but have continued to live through many unsettling experiences that my male colleagues would not have had to endure. The more things changed for me over the years, the more they stayed the same. This is true for many women I know in academia.

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### ***“I Didn’t Expect YOU to Be the University President!”***

My generation did not speak of our experiences of bias and harassment, which unfortunately we believed – or had been conditioned to believe – were “just part of being a woman.” Now, with the #metoo movement inspiring women to stand up and speak out, it is more common to hear these stories, but I would argue that sharing them is still not a widely accepted practice. As I speak out about my experiences, I hope my story resonates with and helps make a difference for others.

## **STEREOTYPING STILL EXISTS**

As the first woman president of a university in the province of Saskatchewan (a position I held for more than a decade) and now the first woman president of a university in Newfoundland (a position I recently assumed), I continue to be surprised when I encounter people’s disbelief that I would be a university president. You would think that in 2020 the image of a president would include people of different races, genders and abilities, but the stereotype still exists that it is an older white male. And sadly, the stereotype seems to be held by people of all ages.

I was in the United States at a meeting several years ago and was sitting at a table with a number of men. The Governor of the state we were visiting came to the table to introduce himself to us. One of my male colleagues from Saskatchewan (where I was at that time the President of the University of Regina) said, “Governor, I would like you to meet the President of our University.” The Governor reached past me and shook the hand of a man sitting next to me. My colleague said, “No, not him.” The Governor then reached over to the next man to shake his hand. My colleague, becoming increasingly flustered, pointed at me and said, “No, Governor, SHE is the President.” The Governor looked at me and said, “I didn’t expect YOU to be the university president!” Everyone had a good laugh in the moment, and in the intervening years everyone at that table has probably forgotten that the misunderstanding even occurred. But it has stuck with me because it makes me reflect on the fact that the image of a leader in our society is often still perceived – and perhaps even fashioned – as being a man.

That was reinforced for me late last year when I met with a group of grade four students to discuss the idea of volunteerism and contributing to community. As I was being introduced, one of the boys made a surprised noise. I looked at him and asked him what he was thinking. He said he was surprised I was the university president. I asked him why he was surprised and he said I did not look like a president. This provided me with an opportunity to ask the students what they thought a president would look like. The students quickly put up their hands, and they had strong views. They said a university president would be older and taller, would have grey hair and glasses – and would be a man. This definitely did not describe me.

How it is that even today, the image of a leader can still be so standardized in people’s minds for both a state governor and a grade four student? The image obviously forms at a young age.

The Internet, which has an increasingly powerful influence on young people, may play at least a partial role in this. Bernard Coleman III, the Head of Diversity and Inclusion for Uber, makes an interesting point in an article he wrote for *Forbes*:

*Have you ever image searched the word “leader?” If you have, you’ve probably noticed most of the images show pictures of men walking up a mountain, leading a group of other men, or a man standing slightly bigger than everyone else. The image results seldom show women, people of color or other underrepresented people. Apparently, a leadership prerequisite is being a man. (Coleman III, 2017)*

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